

Abundance and the Marks of Discipleship

7th Weekend of Easter – May 7/8, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

For weeks, we've been talking about our trip to the Good Life, the abundant life that God desires for each of us. There are no shortcuts on this trip and we'll face lots of exit ramps along the way. But if we begin with the simple teachings to love God and to love neighbor each day and in every way, then we will find a life so richly blessed, so abundant, we'll regret only that it took us so long to find the highway.

“Be transformed by the renewing of your minds”

We've had some fun with the trip metaphor as we've talked about the Good Life ~ detours, exit ramps, u-turns, and the rest. But we mustn't let the metaphor get in the way of our grasping the enormity of what we are talking about.

In these two verses from Paul's letter to the Romans, he transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, in 12:1-2, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has accomplished. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of

Resolving the Paradox

As we saw in the first weeks of this series, in *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Gregg Easterbrook argues convincingly that “almost all aspects of Western life have vastly improved in the past century – and yet, today, most men and women feel less happy than in previous generations.”

After exploring the reasons for increasing levels of unhappiness despite all the material and health improvements in our society, Easterbrook examines the emerging field of “positive psychology.” Increasingly, psychologists are focusing on what actually contributes to a sense of well-being, happiness, and positive outlook. Such studies reveal that optimism, gratitude, and forgiveness are what actually lead to the happy, fulfilled lives that all people seek. For example, in one experiment, college students who kept a “gratitude journal” were more optimistic and reported higher levels of happiness than a control group of students who didn't keep a journal.

Writing from a non-religious perspective, Easterbrook promotes “selfish reasons to become a better person.” Certainly, “selfish” reasons appeal to a certain *me-first* segment of American culture.

As a Christian, my perspective is different. The research findings do not surprise me. They simply reveal that humans are happiest and most fulfilled when we live as we were created by God to live – loving God and loving neighbor. It is the fruit of the Spirit, such as patience, peace, gentleness, gratitude and so on that reflect the image of God in us all. When we do all we can to make that image shine brilliantly, we will find deep and abiding joy and happiness. When we turn to greed or lust or self-seeking, it is as if the image of God in us becomes rusted and tarnished, negatively affecting every part of our being. It is always helpful to remember that Jesus was the true human, more human than any of us. Jesus lived out his humanity in the way that God intended for all humans, a humanity that will be ours when we are fully restored to a right relationship with God in God's new creation.

nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. The trip to the Good Life demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are conformed to the ways of God, for in that we find the abundant life Jesus came to give us. How does this transformation happen? How can we put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with

Why Paul?

Today's Scripture passages are from two letters by the apostle Paul. I am sometimes asked why I talk so much about Paul and his New Testament letters. A fair question.

I am drawn to Paul by the nature of his work, his understanding of the Good News, and his faithfulness to God. Paul's vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward the Good Life.

Paul's letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus' life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony's first great conductor. The music is Jesus' but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a life that is pleasing to God. And a life that is pleasing to God is what we've been talking for six weeks. The life that is pleasing to God is the Good Life.

"Filled with all the fullness of God"

In Easterbrook's chronicling of American anxiety and unhappiness, so much of it seems to stem from a deep dissatisfaction and emptiness. We might chase after lots of stuff and status in this life as we seek to fill our hearts, but as Augustine wrote more than 1500 years ago, our hearts will not rest until they rest in God, or as Paul puts it in today's passage from Ephesians, until we are filled with all the fullness of God. Talk about abundance!

But what an odd phrase. How could we possibly even speak of being filled with God's fullness? We are not God. Is it simply some sort of nice sounding but meaningless sentiment? Of course not. Rather, it is the climax of the entire prayer. Paul prays that the Christians, individually and as a body, might be strengthened in their inner being, rooted and grounded in love as they come to comprehend and to know the limitless love of Christ. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in the hearts of these Christians. And all of this takes our eyes and hearts ever upward to the very fullness of God.

In another letter, Paul spoke of this fullness: "For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him . . . (Colossians 2:9-10)." It is not that we are God, but that in Christ we participate in the fullness of God that dwelt in Jesus. This fullness is "already" ours, but "not yet" fully. It is ours and it is our goal.¹ We are moving toward God's fullness, which we can best understand as God's presence and power. Such a bold prayer by Paul. It may be a bit fuzzy, but that's how it often is when we seek to understand God and the things of God.

Surely Paul would want us to understand that only in God can we find the abundance (v. 20) that God desires for us. It is here that our journey to the Good Life has brought us. If we seek first anything other than the kingdom of God, we will be disappointed. But if we seek God, living within his moral will for our lives, then at the end of journey we will find a fullness, a love, an abundance beyond our imagining. Indeed, we will find that what we thought would be the end of the journey to the Good Life is only the end of its beginning.

¹I've written many times in these studies about this "already/not yet" perspective. It is crucial to understanding much of Paul. We are saved and we are being saved. God's kingdom has come and it is coming. There is more on this in the June 29, 2003, study which is posted at www.standrewcl.org.

Daily Bible Readings

(more from Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Romans 8:12-30 Our inheritance as children of God is guaranteed.</p>	<p>Day 2 Colossians 2:6-19 The fullness of our life in Christ</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 12:3-13 Unity, love, and community living</p>	<p>Day 4 Ephesians 2:1-10 Our conversion from death to new life</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 4:1-16 This follows Paul's prayer (today's passage). You'll see that, as usual, Paul wants us to understand that we are called to build up the body of Christ. Put that abundance to work! Also, don't get off track with Paul's mysterious aside in verses 9 & 10.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

A Special Four-week Teaching Series with Scott Engle

*Our Times and the End-Times:
A fresh look at biblical prophecy*

Beginning Next Week! Sunday May 15 at 9:30 in Wesley Hall

The popularity of the *Left Behind* series generated a lot of new interest in Christian teachings about the End of Days. Now, we have NBC's popular mini-series, *Revelations*. In this four-week Wesley Hall teaching series, we'll take a look at what the Bible actually has to say about the End-Times. Will there be one Antichrist or many antichrists? Will believers be yanked away into safety as the world descends into chaos and tribulation? When will all this happen? What does any of this have to do with heaven? What are we to make of the book of Revelation? What is our own place in all of this and what does it have to do with the lives we lead now?

May Book Recommendation

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future, by Craig Hill

Few topics interest Christians more than speculation about the End-Times. And few topics are so rife with misconceptions and poor biblical interpretation. But Craig Hill's book is a great antidote. Hill tackles subjects ranging from our understanding of Scripture to the books of Daniel and Revelation to popular, but unbiblical, teachings about the so-called Rapture. This is the probably the best book on the subject currently available for laypeople. You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Paul speaks of our transformation, the renewing of our minds. You might discuss what this means to you. Are you in the process of being transformed? Have you been transformed? How would we know? What are some concrete, real-world, examples of what Paul might have meant by the renewing of our minds? Paul means more than just our brains, but still, what does it mean to think as a Christian? Paul also speaks of discerning the will of God - what is good and acceptable and mature. How might you go about finding the will of God for your own life? Do you think this is about which job or school to choose? Or is it about living within God's moral will for us, which begins with loving God and loving neighbor? How might these two different perspectives of God's will play out in your decision-making?
2. Read again the page one text book. Discuss the findings of positive psychology. Do they surprise you? What would you say to a non-Christian about trip to the Good Life? If we are to strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, how far can one go on the trip without Jesus Christ? You might also spend some time discussing what it might mean to be filled with the fullness of God? How can we make Paul's prayer more concrete for us? Should we?